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VOLKSWAGEN BEETLE CONVERTIBLES By Mark Dolliver

April 14, 2003, 12:00 AM EDT

Advertising & Branding



Since we often just glimpse an outdoor ad as we pass by, subtlety is seldom a virtue in that medium. (We'll ignore for now the question of whether subtlety is such a hot idea in indoor advertising, either.) This presents a difficulty for Volkswagen, which has thrived in recent years with subtly nuanced sales pitches. Can the brand run billboards that sustain the tone of VW print and television advertising without leaving passersby baffled? A new batch of billboards for VW convertibles (each showing a top-down, unpeopled car) suggests a mixed verdict. The one seen here is offbeat, to be sure, and it takes a moment for the joke to register. But it's not as if you need to gaze at the billboard for a long time to decipher its message; you just need to spend a moment thinking about it. And that brief effort is rewarded with pleasure when you get the joke. The same goes for a billboard that invites you to "High five birds." (A hyphen between the first two words would have helped us read them as a compound verb, though.) Less successful is a version in which the top right-hand section of the billboard's facing has been removed (just above the photo of the car), leaving that part of its frame visible. We can grasp that it's making a joke about tops being down (or at least missing), but it lacks the sense of free-wheeling fun that animates the ads described above. Also too clever for its own good is an execution that urges the reader to "Be a pedestrian from the waist up." Huh?

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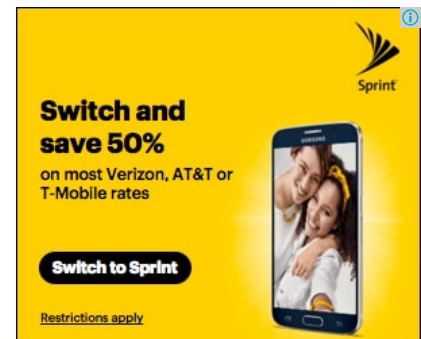
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